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# **Misunderstandings of Tolerance and the Path of Mercy**

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## **Introduction**

**Fault lines usually represent a danger and are a source of tensions. In spite of advanced technology and sophisticated systems we cannot control them. There is no other way to apprehend fault lines than with tolerance or to settle far away from them.**

**As there are geological fault lines there are also theological fault lines. These fault lines pertain to God's image one and triune; to Christ's divine and human nature; to the nature of the Church composed of sinners and saints; to Scripture, written by humans and yet divinely inspired; to sacramentality, actions performed by humans and nevertheless conferring God's grace. Theological systems and doctrinal teachings can help us to live with theological fault lines, but they cannot control them. They remind us of priority of life over laws and regulations. Theological fault lines are deeply connected to God's sovereignty and holiness (Is: 55:8-9) and the way in which the triune God performs humankind's re-creation, salvation and sanctification.**

**Two characteristics are common to theological fault lines. First, while we think of them often as causing disruption, they in fact provide most significant opportunities for growth and understanding. For this very reason theological faultlines call us to mercy and should not give rise to discrimination, exclusion, or condemnation. Second, theological fault lines are interconnected to the relationship between woman and man, marriage and the family. The way we think about woman and man deeply affects the way we think about God, Christ, the Church, Scripture, the sacraments. For this reason the Synod on Marriage and the Family stands at the heart of all other hopefully forthcoming theological and pastoral discussions in regard to an *Ecclesia semper reformanda*.**

## **Part I: Misunderstandings of tolerance**

**An analysis of misunderstandings of tolerance leads me first to determine the nature of tolerance.**

## 1. What is tolerance?

A first definition of tolerance could be the necessity to “live with” or to “bear with patience.” A Greek term equivalent of the Latin term *tolerare* would be the verb ἀνέχω (*anecho*) and its cognates. The Liddell-Scott-Jones translates as follows: hold up; lift up; lift up as an offering; keeping constant to; be of good courage; be patient; bear with patience; bear with strangers; be content with; hold on by one another; hang together (1).

According to the Gospels Jesus himself struggles with tolerance when he exclaims, “How much longer must I put up with you?” (Mt 17:17 and par), while in Rom 2:4 God himself exercises tolerance/forbearance as part of his kindness leading to repentance. In the New Testament, the term ἀνέχω generally aims at the practical life of the body of Christ to be led in peace and in the unity of God’s household (Ep 4:2 and Col 3:13).

Tolerance or forbearance is an active principle that regulates life together and proves to be a challenge. Up to what point does God accept living with sinners? Up to what point should or can we live with people who are sinners and with God who is holy? Or up to what point should or can one accept sin? Up to what point should or can one change a sinful situation in order to ensure unity and peace of God’s household? To ask these questions is to admit that the exercise of tolerance is always related to two essential questions. First, what is the object of tolerance? Is it an idea, an action, or both? And second, what is the limit of tolerance? If certain ideas and actions can and should be tolerated, criminal plots and actions leading to violence and death should not (2).

These questions make it clear that tolerance is not an unchangeable value or virtue. Tolerance is the result of a negotiation. It creates and develops new ways of living for and with one another. It is a dynamic force that overcomes boundaries and pushes back frontiers. It is inseparable from a society’s and a single person’s life journey with changes and developments often beyond human control.

## 2. Misunderstandings of tolerance

My analysis of misunderstandings of tolerance will be based on the petitions expressed in what is known in Protestant contexts as the “serenity prayer,” most commonly attributed to the North American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971). It runs as follows:

God grant me the serenity

To accept the things I cannot change;  
Courage to change the things I can;  
And wisdom to know the difference (3).

### **Misunderstanding # 1**

The first part of this prayer asks to “accept things I cannot change.” We may assume that “things I cannot change” are statements of truth and actions which seem to us simply non-negotiable. In the context of the Synod we may think of the Church’s teachings on divorce and contraceptives as an example of such non-negotiable statements and actions. This conviction goes hand in hand with the belief that others can bear this non-negotiable truth with God’s help, especially by those who are not personally affected by such teachings. In reality, however, people may feel left alone with what progressively becomes an unbearable burden. Shortcomings to such teachings are perceived as “God’s fault” as God does not magically bridge the gap between a Church law and humankind’s weakness. Or they are more or less ignored and swept under the rug. When they are “God’s fault” they foster a false image of God. Consequently, this skewed view of tolerance often ends up with a rejection of a realistically livable Christian life, combined with a search for other “gods” or more accommodating spiritualities. When shortcomings are swept under the rug, they create a bad conscience countered by pious exercises which restore comfortable feelings and produce hypocritical behaviors.

From a theological viewpoint this misunderstanding reflects the absence of a sound theology of covenant and Incarnation as applied by the work of the Holy Spirit throughout Israel’s history, Jesus’ ministry on earth and the life of the Church. Within the covenant relationship established with Abraham and Moses, God prescribes a certain way of life, the Torah, but at the same time God reveals the creation of a new type of humankind capable of living according to this new life style. God’s gift of the Torah goes hand in hand with the creation of a renewed humankind over thousands of years. This view explains why the Old Testament bears witness to a revelation *in statu viae* and why God tolerates violence, injustice and sin in general, even to the point of presenting God himself as an actor in sin (4). The New Testament expresses this same mystery when Paul perceives Jesus as the one whom the Father made for our sake “to be sin ... so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Co 5:20). God’s tolerance does not only consist in bearing humankind’s sin from distance, but in bearing it as the innocent Lamb of God (Jn 1:29).

With Jesus’ incarnation, death and resurrection, humankind is re-formed anew in Christ and called to discipleship. A lifestyle focusing exclusively on

obligations and prescriptions falls short in a world where moral prescriptions are disconnected from discipleship. The best illustration of this failure is the example of the Pharisees, a failure Jesus addresses by saying “Go and learn the meanings of the words: ‘what I want is mercy not sacrifice’ (Mt 9:13 and 12:7).” The lifestyle of the Pharisees leads them to consider themselves as virtuous, separated from sinners and therefore not in need of mercy. Their pride and arrogance created by self-righteousness produces σκληροκαρδία (sklerokardia), a hardness of the heart and exonerates them from discipleship (Lk 18:9-14; Mt 19:8). Caught up in an “anthropocentric immanentism”, they are, in the words of Pope Francis’ Encyclical *Evangelium Gaudium*, characterized by a “supposed soundness of doctrine or discipline [which] leads to a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism”. Their attitude rules out concerns for Christ and others (EG 94).

## Misunderstanding # 2

The second misunderstanding of tolerance is related to Niebuhr’s prayer when it asks for “courage to change the things I can.” Here the misunderstanding of tolerance lays in bearing in silence things which can and should be changed. This kind of tolerance is an abandonment of human capacities for negotiation and a refusal of new creative ways of thinking and of living for one another. It can be rooted in fear of change, lack of intellectual and spiritual openness, lack of self-esteem or survival strategies. Very often it is the result of cultural and political pressures to which can be added religious justification. In this context gender issues may also come into play. A women’s self-esteem may be undermined by an education that engrains in her mind to hold back in the presence of males or by an environment where the affirmation of male supremacy over women is a sign of a politically correct view of justice, order, and peace for society. This kind of misunderstanding is proper to a more or less totalitarian mindset or system, supported by rewards and sanctions.

From a theological viewpoint this misunderstanding reflects an image of an unloving, autocratic, self-sufficient God and a merciless institution. Both exclude possibility of negotiation. Therefore, authentic tolerance is only possible when differences of opinions, ideas, and ways of living are recognized (which does not mean that one has to agree with all of them) and when claims of absolutism and conformism are rejected. Absolutistic and rigid views are contrary to a sound covenant theology, because God’s covenant is always dynamic and geared toward re-creation and renewal of all things in a future God alone foresees (Is 48:7; Ezek 36:25-28; Col 1:10).

This future is rooted in God’s irrevocable covenantal partnership through which God from generation to generation calls humankind to the

eschatological fulfillment of the covenantal promises. Humankind is not the initiator of this covenant and not capable of bringing the covenantal promises to completion. For this reason, God's mercy and forgiveness are always available to humankind (Micah 7:18-20; 1 John 3:19-20). The application of God's mercy is inseparable from a relationship where either God or the people are called to show up for an explanation. There are no situations in Scripture where God would give up on humankind, because God cannot deny his covenant without denying himself. There are no situations in Scripture where humankind could not discuss or negotiate with her God and sue for peace (Lk 14:31), because humankind cannot destroy by sin a covenant she has not conceived and established.

What is it that gives courage to persevere in order to change things that can and should be changed? It is the revelation that the future of God's people does not depend on God's people alone, on her particular faithfulness to laws and regulations or her piety and purity. The future of God's people depends on the deep experience that one is and remains a partner of God's irrevocable covenant. As long as it is not established to whom God's covenantal mercy does not extend to any more, the "path of mercy" is available to everyone.

Jesus fully embraces these theological convictions developed in the Hebrew Bible. What characterizes his public ministry is that he constantly enlarges the time for mercy - in particular in Luke's Gospel and Acts - as also strongly emphasized by John Paul II's Encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* (5). A theological vision of God, his Christ and his Church disconnected from this covenantal relationship is about self preservation and σκληροκαρδία (sklerokardia) hardness of the heart, related to a refusal to believe and therefore to change (Mk 16:14). Although the biblical covenant is expressed in terms of marriage and parenthood, it surpasses biological relationships and stereotypes, because the life of the biblical God does not depend on biological laws. A marriage can be broken; parents can deny their children and children their parents. But God's covenant can never be destroyed by sinful behavior (Ezek 20:9 and 22; 1 Jn 3:20), for the biblical God is not in the image of woman and man (Hos 11:9; Nb 23:19). Whoever clings to this irrevocable covenant, can be sure to find mercy, change, and a future that God alone can give and build in the midst of personal, national, and international disasters.

### Misunderstanding # 3

The third misunderstanding of tolerance is related to Niebuhr's demand to grant wisdom in order to distinguish between the things I cannot and could change. Here, misunderstandings of tolerance stem from human

will to remain ignorant or to maintain a culture of secrecy, silence and complacency. They are associated with personal and collective comfort zones which ensure protection, or confer a sense of power, order, and prideful self-esteem. Ignorance usually puts decision-making processes into the hands of those “who know” or are supposed to know. It is an expression of infantilism created and fostered by a power system which does not allow dissension, adult growth in wisdom, will to change and make changes. Such a system suppresses the possibility of expressing views and refuses critique.

From a theological viewpoint this third misunderstanding of tolerance lacks a sound theology of creation which holds that each human being is created for growth “in wisdom, stature and favor with God and man” (Lk 2:52). The temptation is to impose on others what I or an institution think is good for them. This misunderstanding of tolerance can be overcome through education which stays clear of ideological control and will to force uniformity. Such an education stands right at the heart of Pope Francis’ concerns. His appeal for “providing an education which teaches critical thinking and encourages the development of mature moral values (EG 64)” goes hand in hand with his support for a Christian life guided by wisdom of discernment. Pope Francis embraces in his way Niebuhr’s serenity prayer when he states that only “wisdom of discernment redeems the necessary ambiguity of life” (6). This type of education takes time and is therefore not compatible with a system of rigid control. It can only develop within systems committed to a conviction of equality before God and respect for the individual.

The God of the Bible is a God who acts with wisdom. He knows why he remains with people who reject change or who bear in silence what can be changed. This God never loses courage and makes changes when time has come for change. As a human being Jesus of Nazareth himself submits to growth in wisdom (Lk 2:40). Throughout his public life he discerns between what cannot be changed right away and what can (7) and calls his followers to become children of wisdom (Lk 7:35). As we seek to resolve these misunderstandings the path of mercy offers itself as a resource stemming from God’s wisdom.

## **Part II: The Path of Mercy**

My presentation on the nature of the path of mercy is based on four steps which can be identified in Therese of Lisieux’s “Little Way of Spiritual Childhood.” There are various reasons for this choice. First, there is the centrality of God’s mercy in Therese’s spiritual journey. Second there is Therese’s particular way of dealing with the “fault lines” of her life, be they events, situations or people. Third, Therese’s “Little Way of Spiritual

Childhood” is truly catholic or universal insofar as it can be lived out by all Christians, catholic, eastern orthodox, and protestant, be they married or single, female or male or belonging to a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender population.

My research will combine an analysis of each of the four steps of her “Little Way of Spiritual Childhood” with proposals on how these steps can be related to contemporary issues proper to marriage and the family.

## Step 1

The first step of Therese’s “path of mercy” is to discover that God’s mercy alone leads her to holiness. Or in the words of Pope Francis this first step is the recognition that: “the salvation which God offers us is the work of his mercy (EG 112)”. Here a question has to be asked: what is the Christian goal of marriage and family life? Augustine’s teachings on the three goods of marriage - *fides, proles, sacramentum* - are still valid for the Church today. At various times the Church has struggled with the question of priority given to one over the two other goods. My proposal is to put the call to holiness at the centre of marriage and family life, based on *Lumen Gentium* which teaches that “all the faithful of Christ are called to pursue the holiness of their estate “(LG 42).

If marriage is a means by which holiness can be reached, then all other goods of marriage have to derive from this universal call to holiness, because holiness is the end for which God created humankind. This call to holiness is proper to each human being and “consists of doing God’s will, of being “who he wants us to be” as Therese would put it (8). It cannot be confused with legal conformity to disciplines transformed into laws or a reproduction of Christian female and male stereotypes elaborated throughout history by quite exclusively male theologians living in patriarchal cultures. Holiness is perceived by Pope Francis often as patience. This patience or tolerance, applies perfectly to marriage and family life not only because it refers to ὑπομονή (hupomoné), which takes “charge of the events and circumstances of life, but also as a constancy in going forward, day by day (9).” Holiness is a life style by which human beings progressively find their identity in Christ-Jesus and the ecclesial communion. As “there is no full identity without belonging to a people” (10), a day by day going forward in holiness can never be subject to personal whims, but only the fruit of a discernment led in dialogue with a church community composed of clergy and lay faithful (11).



If holiness becomes the centre of married and family life, each couple and family will have to discern, as Therese herself discerned with the church community of her time, their respective call to holiness. At this point two practical difficulties should be avoided at any cost. The first is not to impose on people views of holiness confused with legalistic faithfulness, and the second is not to be obsessed with immediate results. Priority should be given to the desire to find new roads by stepping outside of boxes and to accompany people, especially those who live in irregular or complex situations in the eyes of the Church (12). So, whenever people approach the Church, what should they and what should the Church look for? Again Therese shows a way. She perceives herself as the “little flower,” object of God’s mercies since her earliest childhood, incapable of reaching holiness by the “harsh stair case of perfection or the “stair case of fear” (13). There is nothing else than Therese’s weakness and God is satisfied with her good will or her “weak efforts” (14). But what makes her strength is her “audacious confidence” that God himself would raise her up to him who is holiness *tout court* (15). Or in the words of Pope Francis what matters is not to be obsessed “with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently”, but the missionary mandate which “includes a call to grow in faith (16).”

Step one of Therese’s “little way of spiritual childhood” makes it clear that no fidelity to legal perfection or fear of exclusion or punishment (intolerance) lead to holiness. Intolerance has never proved to be efficacious for transforming people. According to John Locke the uselessness of intolerance stems from the fact that conscience cannot be forced and that physical pressure cannot bring about genuine belief. It is also rooted in what he designates as the “Alpine argument” or “reciprocity.” For him “every prince is orthodox to himself”. Truth can be different on each side of the Channel, the Alps or the Bosphorus. Therefore, in a struggle over truth the pattern of persecution is an indicator of the distribution of power rather than of the provenance of religious truth (17). Holiness does not depend on imposing doctrinal truth on others, but on faith and hope in the one who has promised to bring his people to holiness. For this reason Christian marriage is of equal value with a calling to a monastic life style, as still upheld by the Eastern Orthodox Church (18).

## Step 2

Step two in Therese’s “Little Way of Spiritual Childhood” consists of a progressive awareness that God’s mercy is in fact merciful love. At Therese’s time much emphasis was put on God’s justice and what it means that Jesus died for our sins. Therese does not embrace a certain spirituality where suffering was sought for in atonement of one’s personal or other

people's sins (19). For her, God is just insofar as God takes into account the frailty of our human nature (20). In other words, she does not perceive God's justice and mercy in tension, but God's justice is an aspect of his mercy.

Justice and merciful love are central to marriage and family life (21). Marriage and family life are the first human communities where political, economic and social justice as a form of love are to be lived out. While for certain people the perception of "my rights and your rights," "my duties and your duties" within marriage may still represent a factor of major stability within social life, the vision of mutuality and mutual love may be the driving dynamic for others. Today, this debate is carried on by complementarian and egalitarian contenders. The first insist on a God-willed hierarchy within marriage which stipulates that "a wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband" as the 1998 Southern Baptist Convention would put it (22). The second, who also identify with biblical egalitarians, see marriage as a life community between two partners whose equality is established by the creation of woman and man in God's likeness (Gen 1:26-27), by oneness given in Christ based on the ontological equality expressed in Galatians 3:28 and on a sacramental unity through baptism and admission to the Eucharistic table or the Lord's Supper (23).

Both views of marriage present different approaches to mercy, justice, and love. For complementarians justice and merciful love are determined by a certain image of manhood and womanhood they retrieve from biblical texts as interpreted by their respective ecclesial communities. These images match cultural stereotypes which usually affirm the superiority or decision-making power of men over women in the civil as well as in the spiritual realm, and exalt women as servants, mothers, educators, and caretakers. Justice and merciful love are regulated by legalistic prescriptions based on these female and male stereotypes (24). According to this perspective the marital relationship is regulated by two convictions. The first is a God-willed otherness between women and men based on sexual difference, but tempered by an affirmation of equal worth and dignity. The second is a God-willed system of rewards and punishments widely controlled by males. Women are kept in dependence on males and try to make up their socially and economically inferior situation by being smarter. Whenever a transgression of the legal prescriptions or cultural expectations occurs, merciful love vanishes and intolerance takes over. The marriage relationship continues as long as the abused partner endures it or it ends in divorce (25). Even when complementarian systems are lived out with the best intentions of love and respect, they remain an ongoing source

for injustice, sin, and violence, because they bear injustice at their root. Once a couple undergoes a struggle the argument of difference will always prevail over the argument of equal worth.

At this point paramount attention has to be given to Pope Francis' following affirmation: "inequality is the root of all social sins" (EG 202). Models of biblical equality help to overcome these social sins created by all kind of power struggles and spirit of competition. For biblical egalitarians justice and merciful love stem from a mutual submission of God and humankind to one another and of woman and man to one another, made possible through the saving acts of Christ for the Church (Eph 5:21). For these biblical egalitarians both partners are called to humility as an expression of love that freely "comes under" (26). Such a view is also adopted by the U.S. Bishops' Conference as it states: "Humility [based on Eph 5:21] must be practised by all the faithful, ordained and lay. This mutuality is rooted in an authentic respect for the dignity of each person and our call to belong to one another in the body of Christ (27). Both the U.S. Bishops' Conference and biblical egalitarians are joined in their understanding of Eph 5:21 by Therese. Phrases such as "what is proper to love is to freely come under" recur 24 times in her works (28).

In the context of marriage and family life, what does this mutual, freely coming under one another and merciful love look like? It means that both, woman and man, give up an idolatrous view of themselves by sharing decision-making as well as life and care-giving powers. According to the various situations in life, it will be up to the husband to freely come under his wife to lift her up or for the wife to freely come under her husband to lift him up. Whenever this mutual ministry of merciful love, freely coming under one another, is lived out, the boundaries of what one can bear are pushed back as the process of sanctification makes progress. The solidity of marriage and family life depends entirely on the will to give up one's prerogatives based on one's sexual difference and to pursue a sanctification process where both, husband and wife, as well as other family members cease to be idols for one another.

### Step 3

Step three is to live in response to God's merciful love by offering one's "living bodies as a holy sacrifice, truly pleasing to God" (Ro 12:1). Therese offers herself to God's merciful love on Holy Trinity Sunday 1895. She cannot foresee God's response to this offering, but nine months later Therese becomes aware of her illness with her first haemoptysis from

tuberculosis during the night from April 2 to 3, 1896. At the same time, Therese enters her faith journey made in darkness.

The road to holiness is unique to each Christian. There is no “copy and paste” as the Spirit of the Lord guides, transforms and heals each believer on her or his very personal faith journey. What makes married life so unique is the call to mutual assistance on this journey to holiness. All living beings love, suffer, and die. But what unites all Christian believers is the call to live, love, suffer, die, and rise from the dead in Christ. What is true for Therese is also true for all those who are called to follow Christ, be they single, married, straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. For everyone it means to undergo a time of purification before reaching the wider context of union with the triune God and the communion of saints in the eschatological fulfilment.

If marriage and family life is a journey toward holiness, then God’s merciful love is not to be confused with romantic love. Time will come where the spouses will experience that their response to God’s merciful love can be costly! It is costly insofar as God’s merciful love is not just for me or the ones I love, but also for the ones I struggle with, I do not agree with, I do not care for, I ignore or I condemn. To take up Jesus’ cross every day and follow him (Lk 9:24) within marriage and family life is not to be confused with applying commands or laws without any discernment, but to practically love one another as Jesus has loved us (Jn 15:12 and 17). For this kind of discernment the winner is not *a priori* a Church law and the loser the single faithful with his conscience. But for both, the Church and the single faithful, the challenge will be the capacity to act in favour of the edification of Christ’s Church in view of the coming of his kingdom (29).

To love as Jesus loved is to commit to a path of mercy and holiness. This path includes darkness and struggles. It includes fault lines in our lives which may compel us to give up or change “godly” convictions, decrees or legislations. Therese herself shows that the road to holiness can indeed pass by the filthy table of sinners where three categories of people sit all together: those who lose the treasure of faith by abusing God’s grace; those who are deprived of the illuminating torch of faith; and Therese herself (30). On the road to holiness the essence of spiritual life is the same for all, be they bishops, priests, deacons, religious and lay faithful. For everyone, the challenge is to go through the various stages of spiritual life including the dark night of the soul, and to become authentic spiritual guides and ministers of the gospel. Not ministers who act “like bureaucrats or government officials”, but pastors who, according to Pope Francis, “can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them,

who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people's night, into the darkness, but without getting lost (31)."

#### Step 4

Step four is to realize that to love as Jesus loves is a goal which will never be fully attained in this world. God's path of mercy is costly precisely because it implies a transformation process that will be completed only in the heavenly Jerusalem.

Hence the following question: what precisely is it that makes her "path of mercy"? She writes: "The good Lord has never had me desire something without giving it to me" and later on "oh my Mother, I never felt so well how much the Lord is meek and merciful; he sent me this test only when I was strong enough to bear it" (32). In these two statements Therese relates the path of mercy to two principles of human growth, maturity and holiness. The first is a progressive clarification of our deepest desires. We can desire in good faith something that later on proves to be above our capacities to bear. God's mercy is to lead us through the ambiguities of our desires to the clarity where we can finally say with Therese that God has never had us desire something without giving it to us. The second is a progressive coming to strength in order to bear certain difficulties of life. Not all tests in life confer strength. There are tests which prove to be destructive. God's mercy is to lead us to a clarification about tests which make us grow and those we should decline or pray to be preserved from.

These two principles of growth and holiness do not exclude the possibility of ambiguous or wrong choices. God's mercy is not to preserve us from any ambiguous or wrong desire and to give us strength in any situation. But God's merciful love proves for Therese and for John of the Cross, whom she quotes, to be "so powerful in works that it knows how to take benefit from everything, of good and evil it finds in me and how to transform my soul into Him (33)." The same conviction is shared by Saint John Paul II writing: "The true and proper meaning of mercy does not consist only in looking, however penetratingly and compassionately, at moral, physical or material evil: mercy is manifested in its true and proper aspect when it restores to value, promotes and draws good from all the forms of evil existing in the world and in man (*Dives in misericordia*, 6)."

Both, Therese and John Paul II's words point to daily struggles and painful experiences which affect community life. Throughout her monastic life, Therese experiences her imperfect love for her sisters. Every time she loves she remains below the standards set by Jesus to love one another as he

has loved us. Sometimes perfect love equals for her a forbearing of others' weaknesses and an admiration of the slightest acts of virtue her sisters produce. However, she comes to the conclusion that Jesus alone can truly love them in her (34). Therefore, the gap between loving people on this earth and loving them in union with Jesus can only find its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem.

Life in a religious community as in marriage and family life imply a lifelong learning process on the way to holiness. There is no perfect marriage and no perfect family life in this world. To take the path of mercy is to accept this reality. Marriage and family life is and will always be a fault line in our world. Laws and regulations help to live with this fault line, but will not produce holiness. Only God's merciful love can take benefit from good and evil it finds in all couples and families and bring our sinful lives into a perfect union with the triune God in the communion of saints. In this life humans can only have faith and hope that God's mercy will effectively bring each member of a community to the perfection of love in the eschatological fulfilment.

## Conclusion

Misunderstandings of tolerance and the path of mercy are deeply related to one another as they are inseparable from our image of God, the Church and society as also emphasized by Saint John Paul II (*Dives in Misericordia*, 13). Misunderstandings of tolerance can be rooted in a conviction that there are things I cannot or do not wish to change on account of a certain vision of God and the Church. They also come from a lack of spiritual and political courage to change things that can and should be changed. Finally, they can be due to a reaction of self-preservation which minimizes or suppresses desire for knowledge, growth and new models of living for God and living for one another. These misunderstandings reflect humankind's sinful attempt to make God and Christ into one's own image. They often end up with only tolerating what is in conformity with this self made image of God, Christ and the Church.

The biblical God proves to be beyond our images. He calls humankind to become in his image and likeness (Gen 1:27) and to renounce making God into our own image and likeness. In order to reach this goal, God established a covenantal relationship through which personal, national and international disasters can be overcome, healing attained, universal *shalom* restored, and God's people made holy as God is holy. Throughout her history Israel is tempted to confuse the power of God's merciful covenantal love with the establishment of a political, social and religiously

justified theocracy in this world. Jesus himself struggles with the temptation of becoming a political, economic or miracle maker messiah (Mt 4:1-11 and par). He rejects these temptations and goes the way of a messiah who lives with, bears with patience, tolerates, “welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Lk 15:3).

By doing so, Jesus paves the path of mercy and holiness for all of his followers and believers. Marriage and family life are means by which God leads women and men on the way to the perfection of merciful love. Holiness is reached by the mysterious and sacramental presence of the triune God in humankind’s lives. His presence produces a progressive clarification of our most intimate desires and provokes a progressive growth in all those who are willing to expose themselves to God’s purifying and transforming actions.

My wish for the upcoming Synod is as follows:

1. To recognize marriage and family life as of equal value with a calling to priesthood and religious life. During the last century a breakdown of confidence of lay faithful in clergy has seriously damaged the unity, peace and growth of God’s household. The exaltation of celibacy over marriage and family life has led to what is perceived by a great number of lay faithful as a diseased control of celibate clergy over married people. If the Church is the totality of God’s people as taught by the Second Vatican Council, then both clergy and lay faithful, composed of females and males, should be involved in decision making processes on all levels, especially in matters which affect foremost the lay faithful such as the number and spacing of children.
2. To recognize the possibility of a second or third marriage for divorced people in line with Eastern Orthodox theology and discipline. Both Churches confess the sacramental and indissoluble character of marriage. The Eastern Orthodox Church however recognizes the possibility of a second or even a third non sacramental marriage which does not exclude from taking part in the sacraments (35). In this case, an unfair barring from Eucharistic communion and confession would be avoided. As a Church we have to bear in mind that what overcomes personal and communal failure and has the power to overcome sin is the deep experience that one remains a partner of God’s irrevocable covenant.
3. To come to view marriage and family life within the larger picture of covenantal theology and not of female and male stereotypes as produced by Christianized patriarchal cultures. In this field the view

of women's nature as mothers should be balanced by a sound discourse on fatherhood and male responsibility, quite totally absent in the Church's teachings today. Covenantal theology is more complex than cultural and religiously justified visions of complementarity between women and men. Here the challenge will be not just to speak to women, but to speak with them, to give equal voice to female and male theologians and not to impose on women a discourse exclusively elaborated by males.

4. To become the starting point of a renewed ecumenical dialogue not only with the Eastern Orthodox Church, but also with Protestant ecclesial communities, which are at the exegetical, theological and practical forefront in exploring aspects of biblical equality.
5. To encourage and foster an appropriate education for lay faithful and clergy on their journey to holiness centered on God's mercy and not on legalistic and ritualistic performances.
6. To foster a deeper understanding of what it means that the Church is Mother. How can a Church who is Mother, let thousands of catholic lay faithful leave the Church in silence such as has been happening for years now, especially in countries marked by Western Civilization? A Church-Mother should hear the reasons why these sisters and brothers do not remain with her, why the precious gift of faith has encountered so many obstacles for thousands of families. A true mother does not just love the children she esteems or are in agreement with her, but anxiously investigates where those who left have gone (Lk 2:45.48). Such a mother is anxious for and capable of necessary change and relentless, merciful outreach to all of her children.

## Notes

- (1) Liddell-Scott-Jones, Greek-English Lexicon, <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsg/#eid=8897&context=lsj&action=hw-list-click>.
- (2) See Barbara de Negroni, « L'affaire Calas : tolérance et politique », in : *L'Invention de la Tolérance, Averroès, Maïmonide, Las Casas, Voltaire, Lincoln*. L'Harmattan, Paris, 2008, 113-124.
- (3) [http://www.lords-prayer-words.com/famous\\_prayers/god\\_grant\\_me\\_the\\_serenity.html](http://www.lords-prayer-words.com/famous_prayers/god_grant_me_the_serenity.html) (last access: May 11, 2014).
- (4) See Hosea 1:2: "Yahweh said this to him, 'Go and marry a whore and have children with a whore'." God's command is here in contradiction with God's law as expressed in Dt 22:22: "If a man is sleeping with another man's wife, both must die, the man who has slept with her and the woman herself. You must banish this evil from Israel". See also 2 Co 5:20.



- (5) *Dives in Misericordia*, 3 and 5-6. Saint John Paul II identifies Jesus' mercy with his messianic mission. Luke's work in two volumes bears witness to God's and Jesus' will of a second chance when Jesus' acts of mercy are extended to the time of the Church. See Brendan Byrne, *The hospitality of God. A Reading of Luke's Gospel*, The Liturgical Press, Minnesota, 2000, pp. 12-14. 50.82.
- (6) See Interview with Pope Francis by Fr. Antonio Spadaro, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/document\\_s/papa-francesco\\_20130921\\_intervista-spadaro.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/document_s/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html), section: What does it mean for a Jesuit to be the bishop of Rome?
- (7) See the controversies on account of the Temple institution, Jesus visibly cannot change in spite of his teaching, preaching and cleansing (Jn 2:13-25 and par) while he makes consistent changes to the celebration of the Jewish Passover.
- (8) Manuscript A, 72. All following quotes from Therese's works stem from : Sainte Thérèse de l'Enfant-Jésus et de la Sainte Face, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Ed. du Cerf, Paris 1998. All English translations of the citations were made by the author of this article. The purpose of human existence which lays in becoming the one God wants us to be is also expressed in the "Principal and Foundation" of Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. See also in this volume the contribution of Mons. Livio Melina, in particular his paragraph entitled "La via maestra della prudenza".
- (9) Interview with Pope Francis by Fr. Spadaro, op.cit., section *Thinking with the church*.
- (10) Ibid.
- (11) A good example of such a discernment process would be the so-called S.E.E.L. or "Spiritual Exercises in Everyday Life" program developed by the Jesuits of Gonzaga University, Spokane, WA, U.S.A., and implemented by St. Aloysius parish on Gonzaga Campus. Such a program which involves priests, religious, female and male layfaithful, responds to Pope Francis' desire for priority given to discernment within a community that is "the home of all, not .... only a small group of selected people." Interview with Pope Francis by Fr. Spadaro, op.cit., section *Thinking with the church*.
- (12) See Interview with Pope Francis by Fr. Spadaro, op.cit., section *The Church as field hospital* and EG 222-223.
- (13) Manuscript C, 237 and Letter 258, 615.
- (14) Manuscript A, 120 and 142.
- (15) Manuscript A, 120.
- (16) Interview with Pope Francis by Fr. Spadaro, op.cit., section *The church as field hospital* and EG 160.
- (17) John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration and other writings*, edited by Mark Goldie, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis; 2010, 31-32; 38-39.
- (18) See John Mayendorff, *Marriage. An Orthodox Perspective*. Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1984 (3rd edition), 69-72 and Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love*, Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1985, 65-84.
- (19) Therese may have read about Sr. Mary of Jesus, member of the Carmel of Luçon, who had offered herself to God's divine Justice. During her particular painful agony on Good Friday 1895, she affirmed bearing the rigors of God's justice, not having enough merits and the necessity to gain them. Therese seems to refer to this incident when she writes, "I thought of the souls who offer themselves as victims to God's Justice in order to

- deviate and to attract upon themselves the punishments reserved to the culprits”. Manuscript A, 212. See also page 1446.
- (20) Manuscript A, 211.
- (21) *Dives in misericordia*, 14.
- (22) Southern Baptist Church <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfmcomparison.asp>. Last access on May 4, 2014.
- (23) See Rebecca Merrill Groothius, *Good News for Women*, Baker Books, Great Rapids, 1997, 19-63.
- (24) Southern Baptist Church <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfmcomparison.asp> . Last access on May 4, 2014.
- (25) In the U.S. there are circa 500 of reported cases of domestic violence per day. See <http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=317>
- (26) In the context of the debates over the status of women within the Christian churches, the interpretation of the term *kephale*/head in Ep 5:21-33 has been subject to a great variety of investigations. See: Sarah Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church. Building Consensus on Christian Leadership*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 2003. See in particular pp. 154- 190.
- (27) Pastoral Letters of the United States Catholic Bishops 1989-1997, Hugh Joseph Nolan, USCCB Publishing, 1998, op. cit., 617.
- (28) Manuscript A, 72 and note 6 in this context on p. 1247.
- (29) See in this volume the contribution of Prof. Eberhard Schockenhoff, in particular his subtitles “L’ideale dell’autenticità nell’etica contemporanea e “La coscienza come voce del proprio io e voce dell’altro”.
- (30) Manuscript C, 241-243.
- (31) See Interview with Pope Francis by Fr. Spadaro, op.cit., section *The church as field hospital*.
- (32) Manuscript A, 190 and Manuscript C, 244.
- (33) Manuscript A, 210.
- (34) Manuscript C, 250-51.
- (35) See in this volume the contribution of Prof. Ioan Chirila entitled *Economia della salvezza e disciplina del matrimonio*.